

## Off-the-Field Scandals in Professional Sports and Impacts on Consumers Brand Engagement

*Gashaw Abeza, University of Ottawa*

*Norm O'Reilly, Ohio University*

*Daniel Prior, University of New South Wales*

*Jason Mazanov, University of New South Wales*

*Twan Huybers, University of New South Wales*

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### **Research Background**

As early as the start of the twentieth century, the rise of professional sport elevated star players to popular visibility in their communities (Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003). These early sports personalities were symbols of athletic excellence and represented the ideals of a growing sport culture (Boorstin, 1992). A century later, the commercialization and mediatisation of sport raised star athletes to celebrity status (Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003). Particularly, the symbiotic and interdependent relationship between the media and professional sports played a prominent role in raising athletes to the near mythical status in society (Bruce & Tini, 2008). Spurred by the public's high interest in sport and sport celebrities, the media regularly cover both athletic achievements and details of the star athletes' personal lives (Lee, Bang, Lee, 2013). Star players are viewed as role models among many sport fans, and are expected to represent not only themselves but also their team, city, sponsors, and fans (Meng & Pan, 2013). As such, sport fans are likely to hold high expectations regarding acceptable behavior of star athletes, and a scandal may emerge when an athlete is caught in activities that are in conflict with these expectations (Prior, O'Reilly, Mazanov, & Huybers, 2013). When an athlete scandal breaks, it receives considerable media attention and coverage (Meng & Pan, 2013), both on-and-off-line.

With the expansion of social media, in particular, consumers today create, listen, learn, contribute and circulate interests, experiences and, most importantly, commentary through collaborative writing, content sharing, and social networking about incidents such as sport related scandals. As SM use in sport increases (Pedersen, 2014; Rowe & Hutchins, 2014), fans are unreservedly sharing their opinions that are becoming increasingly influential on other fans knowledge, experiences, choices, preferences, views, and attitudes (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013). This has been witnessed, for example, in the cases of the Penn State football scandal (cf. Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012) and Lance Armstrong scandal (cf. Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2013). On-and-off-line media coverage of scandals will have considerable impact on the public image of the sport, and the incidents raised serious questions about the impact scandals have on professional sport institutions, sponsors, participants, and other stakeholders (Lee, Bang, & Lee, 2013; Prior et al., 2014).

Major sports competitions face off-the-field scandals on an ongoing basis (Prior et al., 2013). The scandals range from committing atrocious crimes (e.g., murder) to physical/verbal/ sexual assault, to ignoring basic rules (e.g., traffic lights). Identifying and understanding the impacts that the off-the-field scandals' on-and-off-line media coverage have on consumers' sport brand engagement, facilitates a formulation of recommendations for policy making and adaptive strategies. In this regard, a number of researchers have addressed various issues associated with scandal in sport (e.g., Hughes & Shank, 2005; Kondro, 2003; Lee et al., 2013; Mazanov & Connor, 2010; Prior et al., 2013). However, a study on the on-line media (i.e., social media in the case of this study) consumers' reaction to off-the-field high-profile scandals in professional sports is limited. Particularly, little is known regarding how off-the-field scandals impact consumers' sport brand engagement. In this regard, professional sport leagues, such as the National Football League (NFL) and the Australian Football League (AFL), offer contexts where research on the impact of scandals can be undertaken. Both leagues are illuminating cases of repeated scandals throughout the 2000s and before (Paterson, 2009). Both NFL and AFL have acted to govern the off-the-field behaviours by implementing Personal/Individual Conduct Policies to promote lawful conduct and protect their public image (Paterson, 2009). The AFL frequently looked to the administration of the NFL as a 'best practice' benchmark, and developed its Individual Conduct Policy based on the NFL's 2007 Personal Conduct Policy (Paterson, 2009).

### **Research Objective**

Against the above stated background, the objective of this research is to fill the knowledge gap in sport scandal research in two part studies: (i) In the first part, the social media users reaction towards off-the-field NFL scandals will be explored guided by framing theory. For this purpose, social media users' reaction towards the recent cases of Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson will be explored. (ii) Building on the first study, a follow-up second part study will be conducted to assess how off-the-field scandals affects consumers' sport brand engagement. This second part will be underpinned on consumer brand engagement literature. Consumer brand engagement is the level of a consumer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions (Hollebeek, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

To accomplish the stated objectives, three research questions were formulated. The first part addresses: (i) what are the dominant themes highlighted by social media users regarding the off-the-field scandals., The second part assesses, (iii) how sport consumers perceive off-the-field scandals in professional sports?, and (iv) what impacts do off-the-field scandals have on consumers' sport brand engagement?

### **Research Method**

This study will employ a sequential exploratory mixed methods design approach, where a thematic analysis of qualitative data will be collected and analyzed in the first part of the study, and then building on the qualitative data, a quantitative study will be conducted in the second part. The qualitative design will be employed to identify the types of questions that will be asked in the second part of the study. The qualitative study phase will be using a thematic analysis method. To identify the dominant themes highlighted by social media users regarding off-the-field scandal cases and to detect the common natures amongst the cases that portrayed, NCapture software will be used to capture scandal related postings from Twitter. NCapture is an add-on optional feature of NVivo 10 that captures data such as Facebook posts and Twitter feeds (Hart and Taylor, 2013). The data captured will be imported from NCapture into NVivo and then exported to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The imported data will then be analysed using an automated text content analysis software, Leximancer. Leximancer extracts textual data from different types of documents (e.g., Twitter feeds), analyzes the textual data to detect concepts, their relationships as themes, their importance and proximity, and displays the results as a visual concept map (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). A number of studies reported (e.g., Santiago-Brown et al., 2006; Sotiriadou et al., 2014) that Leximancer's analysis is reliable both in terms of stability and reproducibility. In the second part, a questionnaire will be developed from the themes that emerged during the first phase of the study. In this second part, a survey of the football fans/consumers will be conducted. The survey will be distributed to season ticket holders of four football teams (2 NFL and 2 AFL teams that most frequently experienced the incidents) using Qualtrics. Season ticket holders are chosen specifically due to their close affinity and attachment to a sport team. Anonymous in nature, the survey design will have variables related to demographics, attendance factors, length of fan-ship, and impact of scandals on consumer brand engagement. Both open-ended and seven point Likert Scale will be used. Detail questions will be developed from the first part study relating to the consumer brand engagement literature.

### **Research Contribution**

The study will identify the impacts that the off-the-field scandals have on consumers' sport brand engagement. Based on the findings, the researchers will formulate recommendations for policy making and adaptive strategies. The study will also increase our understanding on the topic area. Specifically, a model will be built and presented at NASSM.